

a computerised projection of Lord Olivier's talking head onto a fibre-glass effigy of his skull. The only trouble with this on the night I was there was that it did not function efficiently or at all, or synchronise with his speech. All this, combined with a sound system of deafening dimensions must do wonders for the revenue of the LEB, may be impressive on its own terms, but not very, and as stage design counts for almost nothing. Not so *Cage Aux Folles* which moves on the best-oiled of wheels, with fine automated trucked setting by David Mitchell, has gloriously lit, exquisitely painted backcloths, a masterly expanding proscenium, and some of the most glamorous costumes, by Theoni V. Aldredge that you could ever wish to see. Jules Fisher's lighting is at a similar level, and the total effect is of the utmost professionalism, skill, and style: a pleasure to watch. So too is *Chess*, or would be if the computer could only be persuaded to function properly. As it is one has the sad sight of trucks being heaved on and off stage manually and an aura of imprecision that is an irritation. But Robin Wagner's sets are admirably conceived, Theoni Aldredge's costumes triumphant once again — the opening *Chess* ballet a gorgeous sight, and her ill-cut suits and shirts on the Russians an example of meticulous detail — and David Hersey's lighting as creative and adventurous as always. The 128 television screens not only enchant with their flexibility and magic, but also serve a genuine dramatic purpose, and the hydraulically controlled stage platform is the soul of discretion. *Chess* is certainly a technological show, but here the technology is applied to the needs of the drama, rather than distracting from it.

At the Barbican the RSC mounted Ariane Mnouchkine's *Mephisto* on the fully extended stage of its main theatre — stripped to the back wall — when it would have come across far more powerfully in The Pit. John Gunter's trucked settings looked lost, especially the tiny cabaret stage of 'The Pepper Mill', and in this space Deirdre Clancy's costumes inevitably looked like coarse caricatures, whether such were required or not. The RSC's other recent offering has been the transfer from Stratford of *Troilus and Cressida* in Howard Davies's Chekhovian, Crimean or Franco-Prussian production with Ralph Koltai's fine unit set of a crumbling baronial hall with surrealist overtones. I'm afraid it told me rather more about the director than about Shakespeare, and whilst it diverted initially, by the second half it had become little more than an irritation: skilful and assured, but precious and mannered to the play's detriment. Not so Shared Experience's recent production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* at the Bloomsbury Theatre where Paul Dart's fine spacious setting of Mike Alfreds' strong production offered dramatic punch and a genuine, and appropriate concept. With his own precisely considered costumes, and skilful, well-judged white lighting this was a triumph for Dart to add to his Cherry Orchard at the Cottesloe. He is clearly a young designer to watch.

## REIDing SHELF

Charles Castle's **OLIVER MESSEL** is a very important book. It is barely a decade since Oliver died and it is good that this book has been written while his biographer could still consult so many of his subject's friends and associates while their memories were fresh. I was one of the privileged many who had an opportunity of working with Oliver (and so I cannot bring myself to refer to him as Mr Messel or even as Oliver Messel). I arrived at Glyndebourne just in time for his final new production but his designs remained in the repertoire for most of my decade and he usually came to approve their revival. The Oliver I knew is identical with the Oliver described by Charles Castle. However I was fascinated to read of the early life that made him what he was and the architect that he became when he moved to Barbados for the final fifteen years of his life.

Oliver was one of the great theatre designers of the century. He may eventually be recognised as just about the most important perspective stage artist since the Bibienas. He could create enormous depth with a very few pieces hung parallel to the front of the stage and used in combination with an occasional, simply constructed but complexly painted booked flat. It was possible to hang an entire opera seasons' repertoire simultaneously: daily changeovers could be accomplished with a rapidity unknown today, and complete scene changes achieved during the applause for the previous scene. The sets virtually lit themselves provided the lighting designer stuck to 17 or 54 (there was not even a suitable darker blue other than double 17, until 61 came along).


Oliver's style is not fashionable today but on the principle of 'to move forward, first look back' we should continually re-examine his work. Through this well researched and beautifully illustrated book everyone can get to know not only Oliver the Designer but Oliver the Man.

There is nothing quite like a letter about piles to bring a star into focus. Revelations of behavioural peccadilloes, particularly those which pamper to our own secret desires, only help to reinforce a star aura; but it is simpler to assess talent in a climate of life's more mundane warts. Alan Kendall makes very constructive use of his subject's correspondence in **DAVID GARRICK**. In recent years I have found myself growing somewhat resistant to the received belief that Garrick was a super constellation, combining Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson at the very least. But Alan Kendall reminds us

(and documents these reminders) of the near universal acclaim accorded not only by the pit, boxes and gallery but by Garrick's contemporaries during a particularly rich period of creativity. Surely they could not all be wrong, especially in an age when the craft of hype although alive and well lacked the technologies that have developed it into the major influence on human thinking.

Alan Kendall's book is a straightforward sequential life, drawing on the observations of Garrick's contemporaries. There is an illustration on nearly every page to help the reader visualise the age and its theatre. A model biography for the non-specialist reader like me (although doubtless some sycophants of the David Garrick Fan Club will pick over it with cries of delighted rage), just right in length and depth. A welcome relief from the creative, if passingly entertaining, biographic fantasies currently fashionable among playwrights and film makers.

We are going to become a lot more aware of the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries. The RSC have built a public laboratory to re-examine these texts and test their viability for modern performance. Publication of Judith Cook's **AT THE SIGN OF THE SWAN** is therefore well timed to coincide with the opening of the Swan Theatre as an adjunct to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon. The core of the book is a summary of the lives and works of fifteen seventeenth century English playwrights whose texts are still available to us. Judith Cook places these plays in context by discussing the players, the administrative structure of the companies who organised the performances, and the theatres they performed in. The author identifies various types of play and is particularly interesting



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